

**DANIEL COKER, FIRST BISHOP OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
AND THEIR FIRST MISSIONARY**

We have repeatedly called attention to the large drafts made upon the sublimated tenth of the American blacks by colonizing in Africa and elsewhere during the decades immediately before and after the commencement of the 19th century. Not only were Sierra Leone and Liberia reclaimed and repeopled by this means but several settlements in Canada such as Wilberforce, Windsor and Chatham, were also formed with expatriated colored Americans. Liberia was especially fortunate in this wise. Contrasting with Sierra Leone a traveler wrote as early as 1834: "that whilst the American settlement is decidedly far in advance with regards to intellectual cultivation, producing literary proofs that it is so in journals well edited by Negroes and showing that while salaried officers are not indispensable to good government (its rulers and magistrates being chiefly black) yet the population have not started in the first instance from utter and unrestrained savage life; which is the case with the bulk of the inhabitants of Sierra Leone. The black colonists of Liberia have not only learned the arts of "civilized life but in some measure have enjoyed opportunities of "acquiring that moral or immoral tone which runs through white "society. They have, previous to emigration to Africa, resided "either as servants upon estates or as free proprietors of land "in the United States of America, and have therefore brought with "them into the country of their untutored forefathers a stock of "civil and social knowledge as well as an impulse to improvement." "It is not so in Sierra Leone" where 28 out of 30 thousand are natives and are now getting their first lesson in government. (See Rankin's visit to Sierra Leone Chap. 2 (1834

The Canadian colonists to the same extent possessed these and additional advantages. being only a short distance removed and separated from us only by an artificial line, they are not entirely lost to us. They swung to and fro over line to former haunts and home at will, with an eye always single to political movements there and leading abolitionists kept in friendly touch with them in their new surroundings and abodes. On the other hand the African emigrants were absolutely severed from former country and kindred and the long distance apart broke that sympathizing chain and community of interest between them and the brethren left in the mother country. Besides the African colonies were planted and fostered mainly by those known to be hostile to Negro freedom and equal manhood in America, and the dislike cherished by the race for these founders came to be visited in part upon those of the race who sided with them. The colored American who remained at home came in time to be regarded by the African colonists as hostile both in interest and sentiment and while the question of slavery was still up, the proper attitude toward which - whether to stand and fight

for justice or retreat to safety - was the chief cause of difference- doubtless more or less estrangement was mutually felt by all. Even a life-long advocate of a Negro nationality like Martin R. Delaney was suspected of hostility by the Liberians and when he landed there in July 1859, their committee said they welcomed him because they had " long heard of you and your efforts in the United States to elevate our downtrodden race. though those efforts " were not unfrequently directed against Liberia."

(See Delaney's Niger Valley Report
page 17)

Thus estranged and living widely separated some of the most powerful minds among colored Americans were so completely ^{lost} to the country that not only their achievements, but even their names have failed to reach our time. Yet wherever diligent research has made it possible we have tried to heal the wound inflicted by the ruthless hand of slavery by summoning back to the witness stand those whom its unrelenting hate had scattered to the four winds of the earth.

For surely once, they feel, we were
parts of a single continent!
Now round us spreads the watery plain -
Oh might our wages meet again.

Who ordered that their longing's fire
Should be, as soon as kindled cooled?
Who renders vain their deep desire?
A god, a god their severance ruled!
And bade betwixt the shores to be
The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

Among those whose name and fame became thus penumbrated in the early days of African colonization was the Rev. Daniel Coker of the Maryland of long ago, and finally of Sierra Leone in Africa.

Daniel Coker was born on the eastern shores of Maryland some time near the beginning of the last quarter of the 18th century the off-spring, it is said of a white mother and African father. Like the grandmother of Banneker, his famous contemporary, Coker's mother was of English descent and a serving woman in the family of one Mr. Wright, belonging apparently to that large class of indentured servants brought over from the London slums in the early days to be colonized in Maryland and Virginia. Her name was Susan

~~Coker~~ Coker and the slave father of the boy was named Daniel which latter the boy took with the surname Coker of his mother. Whether he was held absolutely as a slave in defiance of the law which made the child follow the mother's status, or technically by reason of the mother's being an indentured servant, is not now known. In Maryland slavery he was however held until he effected his escape to

New York near the closing years of the 18th century . From Maryland the boy carried with him to his new home the rudiments of education which he owed entirely to the perversity of his young master who would not attend school unless Daniel was allowed to accompany him to and from. Thus while attending the youth Coker picked up the knowledge of reading and writing

In New York young Coker was caught up in the great Methodist wave then sweeping the country under the magnetic influence of Bishop Francis Asbury and like so many other blacks of that time became a devoted follower of Wesley. As to the exact time and circumstance of this conversion both history and tradition are silent nor are they aware of the place of his conversion - whether it was in New York or at his former Maryland home. In all probability, however, he had previously been converted under the influence of the preaching of Robert Strawbridge who had carried Methodism into Maryland about 1765, and from his home in Frederick County planted societies throughout the State. There is a tradition that Coker was ordained a preacher while about New York by Bishop Asbury and ~~whereafter to Baltimore~~ ~~obtained~~ ~~set~~ ~~population~~ ~~of~~ ~~large~~ ~~church~~. went later to Baltimore where he set about organizing a church. The city of Baltimore contained a population of more than a thousand at that time and had (what it continues to have) a larger proportion of colored people than any of the older cities of the country. There as everywhere else in the larger cities Methodist teachings had made such progress among both the free blacks and the slave population that the question as to the proper place for seating colored members of the white churches had already made its appearance in the new denomination by 1793. And what is more this color question was raised about the same time in the cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York and showed so much of a synchronous origin that as is now clear, the course pursued must have been discussed and determined upon before hand by some central body of the denomination. Of course this attitude of their white brethren towards them was at once resented by the colored members who began to agitate the question of a separate organization. Now whether Coker learned of this while in New York and Philadelphia it is not known; what we do know, however, is that as soon as he had returned to Baltimore and secured his freedom by purchase through the aid of friends, Rev. Coker set about providing a separate place of worship for his race. He not only thus established the first colored Methodist church in Baltimore but laid out the first circuits of the Baltimore conference District. In connection with his long pastorate of the Sharp St. Church our subject conducted a school for colored youth with so much success that though he began with only 17 scholars, it had an enrollment of 150 pupils when he severed his connection with it. Coker was already an author of some standing by the end of the first decade of the 19th century; for he put forth the little work on slavery (1810) which was declared by Martin R. Delaney to have covered all the

ground taken by subsequent writers on slavery. But of the book more anon.

With this active and enlightened leadership it was natural that Daniel Coker should come to the forefront in all gatherings for the advancement of his race. Accordingly when on the 9th of April, 1816 some sixteen delegates met in Philadelphia to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church they chose for its first bishop the Rev. Daniel Coker of Baltimore as the man of their number the most worthy and competent to fill the place. Not only was the Rev. Coker thus deemed the most efficient man to head the infant church, but it was to another Baltimorean Stephen Hill (a layman) "more than to any other man that the church is indebted for the form it took." But Rev. Coker was laboring under a charge at this time which he deemed of sufficient weight to disqualify him for the position and so resigned the bishopric the next day which accordingly went to Rev. Allen of Philadelphia. This charge was later on (at the conference of 1818) found to be of sufficient gravity to warrant dismissal from the connection, though the pledge to secrecy of the committee which investigated it was so religiously kept that not even a rumor of the nature and weight of the accusation has come down to the present day. Coker's misfortune was probably nothing more than one of those moral lapses which considering the time and state of the society in which he lived would have been pardonable enough in any other than a bishop and founder of a great religious order, and the fact that his sense of the fitness of things was so keen as to make him voluntarily resign after having been elected, should raise him in the estimation of posterity quite as high as does the decision of the committee which in spite of his almost indispensability and past service to the church found against him in its report.

Our author remained in the country but a short time after this finding and probably because of it, for we find his name among the 88 emigrants for Liberia who sailed out of New York harbor on the Elizabeth the 6th of February, 1820. After a voyage of 36 days the Elizabeth made Freetown in the colony of Sierra Leone, Africa, where a few days were passed in observing the working of the British method of conducting that young establishment. Rev. Coker preached on one or two occasions at the native churches and went with the agents to visit other places and tribes in the interior. But all of this as well as the over-sea part of the journey is admirably detailed in the journal of Coker's yet extant.

The government agents who went out with the expedition had in the meanwhile gone to the Sherbro country South of Sierra Leone, to complete arrangements for settling the emigrants. An agreement had previously been entered into with John Kizell an intelligent native, but former American slave, who had established himself on the Island of Sherbro. John Kizell or (Kizzell or vezzell for all the spellings concur), was a native African the son of chief of the interior some distance, and had been stolen and sold

into American slavery, reaching Charleston, S. C. a few years before the American revolution. Like many others, when Charleston was captured by the British he went ~~with many others~~ to Nova Scotia and from there to Sierra Leone in 1792. Kizell became a Baptist preacher and went out about 1810 from Sierra Leone to preach to the natives, and finally settle on Sherbro Island in 1814, when he brought up five of six hundred acres of land and built the place which he called Campelair. He was one of those who joined and accompanied Rev. Samuel John Mills in Africa, when the latter was sent out by the Colonization Society in 1818 to select a place for a new colony. Rev. Mills had much dealing with Kizell and the highest confidence in him, and left relying much on his honesty and aid in securing the Bagroo settlement when the colonists should arrive.

(See Mills Journal and Second Annual Report
(A.G.S.)

Kizell had become a kind of headman or subruler under the King of Sherbro, and was depended upon by the agents to aid them in securing the location. ~~He~~ met the colonists at Trestown after a nine days' wait, and finally conducted them to his home at Campelair where he had made some preparation for their sojourn during the rainy season.. But the very fact that John Kizell had been in America where he had acquired somewhat of an education and religion caused him to be suspected by the other native leaders. They cast a suspicious eye upon most of his plans and suggestions and the endorsement which he lent the colonization agents went far in the end towards defeating negotiation for land. No palaver could be had with the king and the other leaders who kept proffering first one reason, then another, until nearly half of the colonists fell sick of a fever contracted on the ~~po~~udal marshes and soggy flats at Campelair. All three of the agents as well as 19 of the colonists passed off in quick order there, leaving the question of negotiation for land, and the management of the expedition entirely in the hands of Rev. Coker. Under this grave responsibility our subject remained till the following spring without receiving assistance or advice from home. between the supervision of the emigrants both sick and well, and the never ending negotiation for land/ Rev. Coker would ever and anon run up to Trestown for medical and other aids. It was in one of these trips to Sierra Leone that he met with Commander Alex. S. Wadsworth of the John Adam U. S. N. in October of 1820

Coker went aboard of the naval vessel and he and the commander talked over the desperate situation of the colonists. He told of all the difficulties he had been contending with, of the sickness, famine and insubordination among the emigrants - all of which Commander Wadsworth afterwards found only too true. He turned over the instruction and presents to Rev. Coker which had been sent out by the Colonization Society to their agents, Samuel A. Crozer, who, like his confreres, Samuel Bacon and John P. Bankson, the government agents, had died since being heard from at home. The commander, and Mr. Coker read and construed the "instructions" and a few supplies were given the destitute emigrants

tal tale where the shepherd's ardent prayer was answered by the 'ranges' turning its flood into his rich grounds and sweeping both his cottage and flock away (Gibbon Vol. 5 p 567) Kizell had been almost ruined by the too numerous coming of those whom he had most desired. There was some right however on both sides for John Kizell certainly had served the colonists well in their day of greatest need.

Our lone agent continued his negotiations with the mainland chiefs from his new home at Yonie but as the result proved with little success. Some light may be thrown upon his lack of success by the following in a letter from Captain Trenchard of the U. S. ship Cyone who went out with the first colonists and remained cruising about the African coast till late in the autumn of 1820. The Captain wrote to the secretary of the Navy Dec. 26 of that year that " On the 27th (of October) the cutter returned from " Sherbro all well, accompanied by the Rev. Dabiel Coker, acting " agent of the colony, from whom I learnt that a spirit of insubordination and disagreement had manifested itself among the " colonists on their passage out and had continued to increase, " notwithstanding the unremitting efforts of Mr. Bacon and the other " agents to control and pacify them; that on the death of Mr. Bacon they fell into total disorder openly declaring that they " knew no authority, and would not be controlled, stealing and " pilfering whenever an opportunity offered, and threatening the " acting agent, if he attempted to restrain them. The natives " observing their disunion and feuds, instigated by cupidity and " avarice, took advantage of their ignorance and disagreement and " would not assist or afford them any relief."

In this confused state, troubled by his own people and deceived by the native kings about land for a settlement, did Rev. Coker continue until the arrival of the new agents from America and on the 8th of March, 1821. The new agents were, for the government, Messrs. E. Bacon, and J. B. Winn, and for the colonization society Rev. J. R. Andrus, C. Wiltberger, and to these our author hastened to turn over the business of the Society as early as convenient. Of MR. Coker's work agent E. Bacon wrote in his journal: " After " making other necessary inquiries of Mr. Coker and of those gentlemen in Sierra Leone with whom we were most conversant; also " of some of the American blacks who went out with Paul Cuffee and of Nathaniel peck who accompanied the first expedition; we were " fully satisfied that Mr. Coker had managed the business of the " expedition, after the decease of the former agents, in as judicious a manner as the circumstances of the case would admit." Agent Bacon adds further that he had written a letter approving this management, and recommending Rev. Coker to the friendly notice of the Board of managers of the American Colonization Society. The Colonization Society did commend Rev. Coker's work in connection with the emigrants and preservation of its property, and

printed his journal as well as several of his letters to friends as a part of its report for 1821, but the Board of managers did not apparently see fit, or have it in their power to continue him in their service as agent. The time for elevating colored people by American whites had not arrived even in Africa.

The new agent carried out more colonists with them, but found instead of at Sherbro with the other emigrants temporary abodes at Faurah Bay the former headquarters of Assistant Commissary General LeFeure, consisting of roomy houses and spacious grounds some two miles out from Freetown.

(See Crooks Sierra Leone page 99)

Some of the colonists who had been at Yonie under Mr. Coker were also brought up to Faurah Bay and two of the new agents/ Messrs. Mim and Miltberger took the two camps into custody, while the other two messrs. Bacon and Andrus went in a cruise along the coast in search of a place for settlement which they finally secured in the Grand Bassa country about the middle of April 1821. But scarcely had these negotiations been completed when Agent E. Bacon fell sick both himself and wife, and had to hasten back to America for safety Agents Andrus and Winn likewise sickened and died before the end of the summer. The new agents Dr. Eli Ayres and Lieut. R. F. Stockton reached the African coast soon after this and, selected for the settlement, Cape Mesurado, the present site of Monrovia in Liberia. This however was about the middle of December in 1821 and several months beyond the time of Coker's connection as agent of the colonization Society. Soon after the coming of the second set of agents Rev. Coker who had in the meanwhile sent for his family from America (See Niles Register Vol. 19, pp169-290; Vol 20 p239)

turned over his command to agents Winn and Miltberger and went to Freetown in Sierra Leone. From this time Rev. Coker took up permanent residence in the west African capital and having once for all thrown himself back into his ministerial harness, he set about establishing a church. Here he built up in the end a large Sunday school and lay membership in his church. In fact he had never lost sight of the christian side of his mission to Africa even in his busiest days with Kizell and the discordant colonists; for he wrote from campelair to " all my brethren in America.": " If you " come protestants, come to support an African protestant church " and not make divisions. If you come as methodists, come to support an African Methodist church. We wish to know nothing of " Bethel and of Sharp Street in Africa.- leave all these divisions " in America. before the heathen, all should be sweetly united; " and if darkness is to be driven from this land, it must be by " the united efforts of earnest christians."

(See American Colonization Report 1821)

Doubtless it was this and similar reports of our author's good work in Africa that caused Bishop Allen his friend and former rival for the bishopric to rejoice that God has spread the work

through our instrumentalith upon the barren shore of Africa."

(A.M.E.Discipline 1st Revision)

Thus did Rev. Daniel Coker become the first missionary as well as the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal church. The church which he reared in Freetown was built of stone and was one of the largest in that African capital. In this church after the death of Daniel Coker in 1846(?) they erected a marble column commemorative of his life and achievements. One of the two sons who survived him grew rich as a merchant in trading to the interior, and at his death endowed his father's church which was still standing at a recent date in Freetown. The other son was Inspector of the police of that city as late as 1861, and was thus a man of public influence and large usefulness. As we have already indicated above Rev. Coker was a successful school teacher up to the time of his departure, with a flourishing school run in connection with his church. In this many of the local preachers and exhorters of his day got their little training and ministerial outfit; some also who achieved a higher distinction. Of this latter number was the Rev. William Douglas the eloquent and accomplished rector of St. Thomas Episcopal church in Philadelphia. Rev. Douglass was not only a scholarly preacher of great force, but a careful student and writer as well, having left us not only a volume of able and well written sermons but also a history of St. Thomas' church.

But Daniel Coker's greatest achievements for posterity are those little products of the pen thrown off probably at random with no thought of readers a hundred years thence. And the best of these are unquestionably the Journal and little brochure on slavery. This voyage of but a little more than a month - for they reached their destination on the 9th of the following March - proved a most eventful one. Coker's diary or Journal kept on the passage is extant and forms a bit of most interesting reading, happy in style and teeming with imagery, and bringing us a breath full and redolent of the sea even yet from that far off day. This Journal was the first thing of the kind preserved to us from the pen of a colored man and has inspired pens which well-nigh rivalled it in merit in after years.